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ABSTRACT

A research project examined the issues of how teachers' cultural identities and school experiences affect their definitions of themselves as teachers, and how their identities affect their teaching. The project was a qualitative inquiry, based on reciprocal and interactive relationships. Researchers began by identifying education students who stood out as being aware of and articulate about the influence of race, gender, language, ability, and ethnicity. Six such students were invited to participate in a research project focusing on the contributions of minority teachers. Researchers asked questions about personal information, teaching experience, school diversity, multicultural educational practices, and teaching strategies. From their notes, researchers prepared biographies, then submitted them to the interviewees for feedback and corrections. Overall, student teachers saw themselves as distinct from the white, male, middle class norm. Participants had respect for diversity and did not view it as a barrier. The student teachers believed they needed to facilitate the changes necessary to make students feel legitimate. All saw passion as a force for change in teaching. In some the passion expressed itself as anger; in others, excitement. All sought the means to enact culturally relevant pedagogy. Findings revealed that the more conscious individuals are about efforts to assimilate into the culture, the less threatening are their differences to others such as students and parents. (Contains 27 references.) (SG)

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What Does Cultural Identity Have to Do with the Preparation of Teachers?

Methodology and Findings

Presented at the
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by

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Cultural Identities and Their Impact on Classroom Practice

The Impetus

As women who have been successful in school cultures, yet also estranged from it, we have grown into teachers who continuously ask questions about the impact of our stories on our teaching. Our work with students who have not identified with mainstream society has affirmed our belief in the impact and values of what we once thought of as "outsider" status, but now see as "double", and often "multiple consciousness" (Henry, 1992). Although our students' life experiences are different from each others' and our own, the intersections are important in the teaching and learning we share. This realization has led us to increase our knowledge about the diverse backgrounds of our students and how that diversity influences their experiences as students and teachers.

Three years ago we made a commitment to ourselves and to each other to work together, first as colleagues, then later with former students, to learn more about issues of equity and diversity in teaching. By looking at all of our autobiographies and by listening to and reflecting on these stories, we ask, "How do teachers' cultural identities and related school experiences affect their definition of themselves as teachers?"; and, "How do their identities affect their teaching?"

From Life Experiences to Teaching

When the identities of teachers are discussed, it is often in terms of the disparity between a working force that is primarily white, middle-class and female, and the need for a more diverse teaching population. (see, for example, Grant & Secada, 1990 and Trent,

1990). Common sense and democratic ideals dictate the need for teachers who reflect the cultural diversity of the student population. The current realization of the need for schooling and curriculum to be more inclusive if it is to meet the needs of all student, adds further impetus to our concern for a broader array of voices in teaching. Slowly, but increasingly, scholars have noted that school behavior, knowledge of community norms, and decisions about who and what should be included in curriculum can be influenced by the identity and experiences of the teacher (Delpit, 1986, 1988, 1992; De La Luz Reyes, 1992; Foster, 1990, 1993; Henry, 1992). Although there is limited, but growing, research on the presence of African-American teachers in schools, (see King, 1993 for a review of this literature) our understanding of what teachers from diverse backgrounds bring to their pedagogy is still limited. Life histories of culturally diverse students who become teachers offer the potential for understanding how these differences contribute to enhancing and, potentially redefining the role of teacher.

Teachers' autobiographies and their importance in teacher practice have been highlighted in research on teacher thinking (Abbs, 1974; Pinar, 1980; Britzman, 1986, 1993; Grumet, 1988). Prior experiences influence teachers, receptivity towards various teaching methods, the problems they identify as worthy of solving and the images they use to identify themselves as teachers (Knowles, 1993). We also know that teachers' knowledge and thinking is socially conditioned, and that they automatically shape teaching to account for cultural factors that influence or are thought to influence students (Avery & Walker, 1993; Hilliard, 1992; Elbaz, 1981). Regardless of the kinds of programs teachers-to-be experience, research-based, reflective or problem-centered, it is often the "superior pedagogy of

experience" (Knowles, 1993) that wins out in shaping future teachers. Experiences as students play the most important in the definition and practice of the teacher role (Lortie, 1975). It is therefore crucial that we as teacher educators look at the connections between life histories, beliefs about teaching, and classroom practice.

Both multicultural education and autobiography recognize the central position of "self". Each acknowledges the myriad points-of-view and perspectives which students and teachers bring to learning experiences. However, there have been few studies which use the lens of culture to look at the intersection of teacher and student identities. Banks (1993) acknowledges the "rich diversity among the cultures of teachers is an important factor that needs to be examined and discussed in [education] classrooms" (p. 12). Foster (1990) reminds us that the talk of Black teachers is the "missing voice" in teacher education programs and we take note of the fact that there are many missing voices. In a working force where 87% of American teachers are European Americans, the voices of the 13% who are ethnic minorities are underutilized resources to the discourse about classroom practices.

Feminist Research and Collaborative Conversations

The notion that individuals create or construct their own knowledge challenges the traditional view that there is a body of knowledge which is digestible by everyone in an identical way. It turns upside down the idea that we all share the same view of the world, and that learning and teaching translate into getting people to more efficiently digest, or see that knowledge. If we acknowledge that people construct their own knowledge, then there is a pressing need to be able to come to intersubjective, (shared) meanings. Because the knowledge that we construct is heavily influenced by our positions within particular

social, economic and political systems (e.g. female, working class, lesbian, Latino), this positionality takes on real importance in teaching.

Modern feminist scholarship is compatible with the postmodern view of knowledge as socially constructed. Both question assumptions that researchers have traditionally had about the necessity of an "objective" stance, and the separation of the researcher and the "researched" (Banks, 1993). Both point out ways in which the gender, ethnic or cultural experiences of the teacher or researcher, as well as the student or research "subject", are significant since these factors influence the ways in which they have created knowledge, and thus affects their world view. Both acknowledge people, embedded in the social world, as individually defining and experiencing that world, while also being a part of the society that is defining them. This acknowledgement of multiple and common perspectives creates the need for researchers (as well as teachers) to come to some mutual understanding with the people or groups they are trying to understand.

The feminist research methodology which we used for this study can be described as qualitative inquiry, based on reciprocal and interactive relationships (Lather, 1991). Our approach is conversational in tone with an explicit intent to validate both rational and cognitive epistemology traditionally associated with academic (and male) research, as well as "the emotions, intuitive leaps, and less verbalized feelings that have been linked with woman's learning" (Hollingsworth, 1993, p. 376). Like the research of Janet Miller (1990), Sandra Hollingsworth (1993), and Michelle Fine (1993), we make no attempt to separate out (or bracket) our personal biases. We believe the result of this is the reconstruction of knowledge which is "inseparable from the reconstruction of ourselves" (Jagger, 1989, p.

145).

For our data collection process we use a feminist strategy of collaborative conversation. Hollingsworth speaks directly to the concept of collaborative conversation as "both a method of longitudinal research and a means of support in learning to teach" (1993, p. 374). She names this a feminist approach because of three defining characteristics: 1) asking questions which "lead to social changes in oppressed conditions...in underpowered life roles" (p. 376); 2) aiming this inquiry at the gender-based needs of elementary school teachers; and 3) making equally vulnerable, the researcher and the people who are the object of the research.

Finding shared meanings and understanding takes time. Our meetings have extended into the third year and we have continued to negotiate and change the direction of the study as it continues to impact our lives and as we continue to become informed by each others' knowledge and experiences. What began as a clock-watching 45 minute "meeting" at a local Teachers' Center, has changed to longer and longer sessions in which we often lose track of time and other obligations. We end each session by asking what the focus of our next session will be. After each meeting, either one or both of us record the conversations from the meeting and send the notes out to all group members. These notes then become reference points during the subsequent meetings. Recently, all group members have begun writing about ideas or experiences which particularly interest us (e.g., "How my identity influences my teaching"), each shares it at the next meeting, when the writing is for an audience we also edit for each other. This, in a very real way, accounts for the validity of the data collection and interpretation.

History of the Group

When we began talking three years ago about our ongoing work on urban campuses, we immediately thought of our students. We share an appreciation for the opportunities we have available to us, through our diverse student populations, to expand our awareness and perspectives. Each of us began to identify particular students who, through discussions and journal entries, stood out as being aware of and articulate about the influence of race, gender, language, ability, and ethnicity. We asked six students, three from Roosevelt University and three from National-Louis University, if they would like to be involved in a research project focusing on the contributions minority teachers bring to classrooms. Five of the students were undergraduate seniors and one was a graduate student in preservice elementary education programs. The five undergraduates were scheduled to student teach in Spring, 1992 in urban public schools. All six agreed and we began by interviewing them individually about their cultural identity and personal history.

Using an interview protocol as a guide, we asked questions about personal information, teaching experience, diversity in their schools, multicultural educational practices, and teaching strategies. We then wrote a brief biography for each person, including ourselves, as we consciously began to move toward having a more shared equal status in the group as opposed to remaining in the role of researcher, apart and separate. We returned the biographies to the students, asked them for feedback and corrections, then revised them and returned them to the owners.

Our group ranges in age from early twenties to thirty-six years old, with seven women and one man. The youngest member of the group, Anna Maria, is an Ecuadorian-

American woman who teaches a primary, bilingual classroom in the Chicago Public Schools. The other five participants include: Milagros, a young Puerto-Rican-American woman who spent many years as a student in special education classrooms, and who now teaches in a public school with a large population of Spanish speaking students; Veronica, an African-American twenty-six year old who got an undergraduate degree in broadcasting and is student teaching in an integrated school in the city; Albert, a Mexican-American in his twenties, who is teaching African-American students in a poor, suburban school district; Kim, a multi-racial woman in her twenties who is teaching primarily Spanish speaking Mexican-American students on the west side of Chicago; and Debbie, a multiracial, thirty-six year old mother of two, who obtained a teaching degree two years ago and is teaching bilingual students in the Pilsen area of Chicago. We are both Caucasian-American, women in our forties; Mari is the mother of two teen-agers who started teaching in an urban classroom 26 years ago and Pat is, who identifies as a Lesbian grandmother from a working-class family has taught in rural and alternative schools.

As we read and reread the autobiographies, it became clear there were common experiences (e.g., the sense of being an "outsider" in school), and there were also conflicting issues (importance of the retention of a non-English first language). We began to think about the value of bringing the students together to meet each other and share stories. We thought there could be immediate gain to each individual by having the opportunity to talk to each other, and it seemed a more efficient use of time. It also provided a way to eliminate our role in the middle, carrying back stories and representing other people's ideas.

We began to meet regularly during the first year, while five of the students were still

student teachers, and have continued throughout their first year and now into their second year of teaching. The group has taken on a new identity as trust has been established and power has shifted. One sign of these changes is the decision of group members to change the focus of the research from "minority teachers" to "culturally-aware teachers". We no longer meet at any institution but rather at a centrally located home where everyone brings "treats" and some members of the group bring children. As our former students have gained more experience as teachers in their own right, and we have articulated what we have learned from being participants in the group, there has been a shift for us to a role that is less central. But because we are the principal people who are interested in formally presenting this as research in the academic community, we retain primary responsibilities as researchers. The other six members of the group define their roles more in terms of participants in a dialogue which leads to support and sustenance for teaching, and has the potential to lead to social change in oppressed conditions (Hollingsworth, 1993). We make sure that the conversations are recorded through notes and tapes and are systematically analyzed. Together, we consciously make decisions about future directions for the group, what data is collected, and how it is presented.

We all agree that the group is an important process in our professional, and to a degree, personal lives. We not only discuss the impact of being culturally aware on the elementary school classrooms our students occupy, but also the college classrooms we all occupied. There has been a growing respect and concern for one another as the conversation has grown more personally and professionally revealing, as we've talked through conflicting viewpoints, and as there are more shared or common experiences.

The initial research focused around what minority teachers bring to classroom practices that is different because of their minority identification. When the biographies were written and discussed, we noticed the common theme of feeling like an "outsider", alienated from schools became evident. "Outsider" status, its causes and effects, then became the topic of discussion for several meetings. We moved to discussions about "minority" teachers as role models. By this time, most of the group members were in their own classrooms in urban schools, and the immediacy of what was going on in their day-to-day professional lives became the focus of the discussions. Their identities were changing as they moved from student to teacher and they had a growing awareness of the potential for power and influence in their role. Meanwhile, we continue to become more and more aware of assumptions we'd made, and how much we had to learn. We talked about the expectations of us as teachers and professors, in terms of how dress, behavior, and language fit with self image and personal definitions.

As we write this paper, the conversation has moved to the personal experiences, as culturally-aware people, which account for the ways we act in our schools and in our classrooms. We talk about the clash of cultures, identities, and roles with school cultures. There is the constant searching for ways to have power and share power, to make decisions in the best interest of ourselves and our students, and to approach what it means to be professionals in humanizing ways in institutions which make this often difficult and sometimes impossible.

Findings

As we looked at the data and at our experiences with this group of culturally aware

teachers, there are common themes (Of course, there are differences as well, as we continue to recognize the diversity and multiplicity of voices in the group, but in this report, we are focusing on the commonalities). In looking at the shared ideas there are several which stand out.

The first is the idea that culturally aware teachers are "gate-openers" as opposed to "gatekeepers". Because of an awareness of difference from white, male, middle-class norms of schools, these six teachers have felt that their teachers have served to keep them apart from the mainstream of school and, in a larger context, away from access to a different social status. Often this was done by disregarding or disapproving of their skin color, language, dress or family connections. For example, Ana Maria was told her mother was "of no use" to a high school counselor because she couldn't speak English. Ana Maria never returned to that school and dropped out altogether for several months. Now they struggle with how they can be inclusive in their classrooms by setting new standards which invite students to participate and succeed for who they are, rather than be denied because of who they are not.

This leads to a second finding which is that we actively work to affirm children in their own right. Student diversity is seen, clearly, respected and not regarded as a barrier. They see themselves as the people who must facilitate the necessary changes needed to make students feel legitimate. Kim is taking lessons in Spanish so she can convey the message to her students that they don't have to lose their native language, as her parents did, in order to succeed.

All of us see passion as a force for change in our teaching. For many of the women,

the passion takes the form of anger; anger toward the way they were and are treated; anger toward being marginalized and dehumanized in schools throughout their entire lives. For some, the passion is in the excitement to teach and being able to change classroom experiences for their students, to provide them with different experiences than what they had. For example, Albert sees the teaching of writing to be a revolutionary act for his students, a way for them to escape illiteracy and a way for them to validate their own life experiences.

The fourth finding is that all of the teachers actively search for tools, strategies and other means to enact culturally relevant pedagogy. They seriously look at the classroom environment, physically and psychologically. They attend to the emotional as well as the academic needs of their students and take their personal lives into account. They use their own autobiographies and the biographies of their students to inform practice and choice of curriculum. For example, this year Debbie has painted and decorated her classroom, to reflect the care she feels for herself and her students, the people who have to occupy it for an entire year.

The final finding is that the more conscious individuals are about the decisions they make to assimilate into the mainstream culture, the less threatening are the difference so others, like students and parents. These teachers accept their students and have high expectations for them because they do not see them as "deficient". They respect differences in non-judgmental ways and work to maintain them while bringing children into the dominant culture as well.

Epilogue

The study and the methodology reflects our value in autobiography and personal history; connections with other people's experiences and knowledge; non-hierarchical relationships; the role of teacher/learner; the hermeneutic process of peeling off layers of meaning to come to better understanding; the holistic notion of personal and professional not being arbitrarily separated; the need for dialogue in order to grow as a professional; growing as a professional as an ongoing activity; educational research valuing the experiences of teachers and contributing to the ongoing development of ourselves and our student collaborators as professionals.

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